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SILVER LININGS: BENEFITS OF CLOUD COMPUTING

> As the face of technology continually changes, we have an ever-expanding list of popular buzzwords, phrases, and terms that find their way into the vernacular. One of the more commonly heard of these now is "cloud computing," or "the cloud."

This cloud is an endless collection of computers that route traffic across the Internet and provide access to programs and services, all of which are living on a computer (or series of computers) somewhere. And it's likely providing services to you in one form or another, whether at a computer, on your smartphone or your tablet.

While the thought of your business being dependent on an Internet-based process might feel less than safe (what if the connection goes down?), we've been dependent on remote computing for many years with payment card processing, network order transmissions and delivery updates by cell phone. The difference with the cloud is that we no longer have to have a phone line for each process, we don't have to wait for a computer to answer the phone and we are no longer limited to a single process when the computers answer those calls.

Not so long ago, many of us connected to the Internet via that same phone line — the alternatives at the time were far too expensive for the vast majority of Internet users. So, we paid $40 to $60 for a phone line and then paid another company for the ability to get to the Internet so that the computer could take 30 seconds or so to show a photo that now appears instantly when we open an email. Broadband Internet access is as cheap as $15 per month. This availability and low cost enables all the communication needed for the cloud to exist.

POS over the Cloud

If you are using a Point of Sale (POS) system, odds are that you are getting the benefit of cloud computing in some form or another as well. The cloud over broadband allows for nearly instant transmission of many simultaneous data processes and the retrieval of just as many. This allows cloud-based POS systems to process thousands of payment card sales, network orders, delivery confirmations and marketing emails while the systems are doing their regular jobs of handling design, delivery, bookkeeping, customer satisfaction modules and enclosure card printing. The total labor hours saved simply by reducing the time needed to process credit cards alone is staggering.

Another huge advantage in the speed of cloud computing is the ability to update POS systems and other cloud-based programs you may use remotely. Whole system updates that once had to be manually loaded from CD/DVD, tape, or (some of us remember) floppy diskettes are now automatically sent to your system without the need to stay late in the shop.

But it's not just software updates that make use of this single process. Shops also had to spend time loading data such as street directories into POS to validate recipient addresses, whereas the cloud provides address validation without the need to download any data at all — addresses are checked on the Web as users enter them. And because those systems are all going to one place on the Web, keeping data current for shops and websites can be done by updating one single source.

Customer Service

Web-based services are connecting consumers to their favorite vendors like never before. With handheld devices becoming more sophisticated and less expensive, your consumers will be turning to the cloud more often. Cloud allows customers to track order status updates as the order moves through order, design, and delivery processing. In today's internet-based sales climate, floral customers can now know when an order has left the shop and when it's been placed with the recipient without having to make a phone call.

Most companies are working to eliminate the cost of paper, postage and labor by providing statements of account via a secure Web portal (credit card companies work hard to eliminate putting customer data on paper or even in an email) where customers can log in and see their statements, invoices and account history.

The cloud is what allows all the necessary components of today's business to work together more seamlessly — from receiving Internet orders from your website, to looking at an analysis of how weather affected sales. It blurs where the POS system ends and where the Web begins and allows users and consumers to focus on flowers instead of the processes under the hood. And that's how it should be.

Ironically, it's a cloud that allows more time in the sun. ❁

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